

ESTIMATING POTENTIAL FOR ADAPTATION OF CORALS TO CLIMATE WARMING

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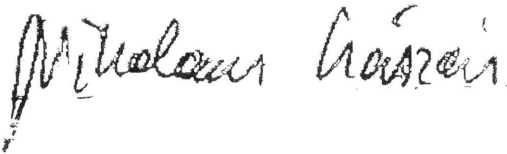
A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN SCIENCE

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES
PLANT FUNCTIONAL BIOLOGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE CLUSTER
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nikolaus Császár". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'N'.

Nikolaus B. M. Császár

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A PhD is a very personal and challenging journey, one which is, however, rarely undertaken alone. There are many people that I want to thank for accompanying me all along. First of all, I would like to thank my wonderful principal/co-supervisor team, Peter Ralph and Madeleine van Oppen. Your science and generosity of spirit is truly inspiring. Thank you both for your amazing guidance and support, and for challenging me to think outside the square. It was a wonderful experience working together with you both scientifically and personally.

Many thanks are also extended to my second co-supervisor, Dick Frankham, who never flinched in explaining to me concepts and pitfalls of quantitative genetic studies. This thesis would have been impossible without your guidance and advice.

Along with my team of supervisors, other people helped with the development of protocols and contributed either with intellectual input or otherwise. Foremost amongst these is Ray Berkelmans. Ray, I want to thank you for that, but also for being generally a great mentor and dive buddy. Jos Mieog probably never realised how much he initially helped me in finding my way through the ‘labyrinth’ of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS). Thank you for that, Jos, and for so often sharing the ‘catch of the day’ with me at AIMS house #5. I also want to thank Francois Seneca, not only for the wonderful collaboration on the coral gene expression study, but also for an unforgettable and amazing castaway experience on Havannah Island. Remember, the castaway revival is due in 2017 (maybe with better equipment this time)! I also want to thank Andrew Negri for helping me with almost everything in general and pigment analysis in particular. Thanks also to Lesa Peplow and Andy Muirhead for their help in the laboratory, and to Andy also for organising wonderful sailing trips around Magnetic Island. Wayne Knibb’s initial contribution to the project is also greatly appreciated. I hope to continue working with all of you in the future. The considerable time I spent at AIMS has been made so enjoyable by the ‘T-ville gang’: Ana Gomez, Adrian, Bry Wilson, Carolyn, David Abrego, Eneour Puill-Stephan, Emily Howells, Emmanuelle Botte, Francois, Ingo Burghardt, Jos,

Joe, Kim, Verena Witt, Vivian Cumbo, Patricia Warner and many more whose full names escaped me but their faces and great memories of good times have not.

A big thank you goes to my fellow colleagues from the Plant Functional Biology and Climate Change Cluster (C3) at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS): Isabel Jimenez, Lucy Buxton, Katherina Petrou, Kim Wilson, Rachael Smith, Alex Griffin, Verena Schramayr, Olivia Sackett, Sutinee Sinotuk, Ying Hong, Ross Hill and Martina Doblin. I thoroughly enjoyed working with you and I hope our paths will cross again.

The biggest thank you goes to my life-partner Anita Michalski, who left the imaginary Austrian shorelines to embark on this journey and to join me in Down-Under. Dear Anita, I was lucky to have your love, faith and support throughout this time, and I am looking forward to our next journeys wherever they may take us.

Last but by no means least a huge thank you to my family, who has seen me only occasionally during this journey, but supported me continuously.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Eva and Ferenc, and to the memory of my great Master-thesis father and dearly missed fatherly friend, Arnfried Antonius († 2010), who was among the foremost to call attention to the threats corals are facing presently. Your legacy lives on in the young researchers that follow your pioneering path.

ABSTRACT

Climate models predict rapidly warming oceans throughout the 21st century along with increased mortalities in reef-building coral-algal symbioses. Yet the ability of corals to adapt genetically in an evolutionary sense to a warmer climate is unknown. The adaptive potential of corals can be approximated by the extent to which variation in thermal tolerance is caused by genetic factors (i.e. by the broad-sense heritability, H^2). This thesis investigated H^2 in a total of eleven thermal tolerance traits from two populations of the reef-building coral species *Acropora millepora* in the central Great Barrier Reef, Australia. The first population that was investigated associates with thermo-tolerant algal symbionts of the genus *Symbiodinium* (clade D), and came from Magnetic Island (MI), while the second population from Orpheus Island (OI) associates with the intermediately tolerant *Symbiodinium* type C2. Traits investigated were characteristic of the coral host, the algal symbiont, and the holobiont (whole symbiosis).

The present thesis revealed extensive genetic variation in algal symbiont traits, which, together with short generation times, allows for rapid symbiont adaptation to climate warming. A significant adaptive potential was also found for coral colony growth rates, defined here as a holobiont trait. This is in stark contrast to the coral host, which did not display heritability for the majority of the traits investigated for either population. The coral host with its long generation time has therefore only a low potential to adapt to rapidly warming oceans.

Five of the six thermal tolerance traits yielded significant heritabilities in each of the two symbiont types. In clade D symbionts from MI, the adaptive potential was given for the maximum quantum yield of photosystem II, F_v/F_m , one of the most commonly studied stress parameters in coral biology which indicates the overall health condition of photosystems. The one trait that did not yield a significant heritability in D symbionts was non-photochemical quenching (Φ_{NPQ}) of excess excitation energy. The trait Φ_{NPQ} can be considered as a switch for xanthophyll cycling, a mechanism that protects photosystems through conversion of the pigment diadinoxanthin (DD) into diatoxanthin (DT).

However, D symbionts diverted 50 % of the incoming light energy for the initiation of the xanthophyll cycle (i.e. via Φ NPQ), and the xanthophyll cycle mechanism itself showed significant heritability in either symbiont type. Both symbiont types also displayed significant heritability for another measure of photoprotection, the ability to regulate the pool size of photoprotective xanthophyll pigments (XP) relative to total light-harvesting pigments (LH). Although Fv/Fm did not yield a significant heritability in C2 symbionts from OI, both symbiont types again showed heritability for the effective quantum yield of photosystem II (Φ PSII), and for unregulated energy dissipation (Φ NO).

For traits reflecting the function of the coral host, messenger RNA (mRNA) expression levels of four fundamental genes involved in the oxidative stress response were investigated. These genes code for cellular defences which regulate cellular iron homeostasis (i.e. Ferritin), repair denatured proteins (i.e. the heat shock protein Hsp70), detoxify harmful oxygen radicals (i.e. the mitochondrial enzyme manganese superoxide dismutase MnSOD), and might be involved in the dysfunction of coral cell-adhesion proteins during bleaching via a remodelling of surface receptors in the extra-cellular matrix (i.e. a zinc-metalloprotease, Zn^{2+} -met). Each coral host population, however, showed heritability for expression of just one of those four genes (i.e. MnSOD in the MI population, and Zn^{2+} -met in the OI population), therefore displaying only a limited capacity for evolution of thermal tolerance.

Holobiont growth showed a significant heritability in both coral-algal populations, thus providing the basis for evolutionary adaptation. In the long term, however, this trait might be impaired by ocean acidification, which has a negative impact on coral calcification and, therefore, on holobiont growth rates.

In summary, algal symbionts have short generation times and considerable genetic variation in functional traits, thus allowing for rapid adaptation to higher temperatures. However, adaptive response estimates based on low heritabilities in coral host traits along with the coral's mainly sexual reproduction and long generation time raise concerns about the timely adaptation of the holobiont in the face of rapid climate warming.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	IX
LIST OF FIGURES	XI
LIST OF TABLES	XVI
1. BACKGROUND, CONCEPTS AND PROJECT AIMS	2
1.1. The coral algal symbiosis	2
1.2. Mass coral bleaching and climate warming	4
1.2.1. Mass coral bleaching	4
1.2.2. Environmental change and climate warming	5
1.3. Thermal tolerance	7
1.3.1. Natural variation in thermal tolerance	7
1.4. Acclimatisation, adaptation, and the field of Quantitative Genetics	9
1.4.1. Acclimatisation	10
1.4.2. Evolutionary adaptation	12
1.4.3. Evolutionary Quantitative Genetics	13
1.4.3.1. Partitioning of genetic and environmental variation	14
1.4.3.2. Genetic variation and heritability	16
1.4.3.3. Response to directional selection	19
1.5. Thesis objectives	21
2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	25
2.1. Part I - General methodology and experimental set-up	25
2.1.1. Description of <i>Acropora millepora</i> (Ehrenberg)	26
2.1.2. Sampling of coral colonies	27
2.1.3. Genetic identification of coral hosts and <i>in hospite</i> zooxanthellae	29
2.1.4. Experimental set-up	34
2.1.5. Measurement variables	36
2.1.5.1. Fluorescence measurements	36
2.1.5.2. Coral growth rates	39
2.1.6. Post-experimental analysis	42
2.1.6.1. Symbiont pigment ratios	42
2.1.6.2. Coral host stress gene expression	43
2.1.7. Statistical analysis	49
2.1.8. Heritability estimates	50

2.2. Part II - A proteomics approach to assess levels of cellular stress in scleractinian corals	52
2.2.1. Introduction	52
2.2.2. Separation of coral tissue from the skeleton and protein precipitation	53
2.2.3. Protein extraction	53
2.2.4. Reduction, alkylation and desalting	55
2.2.5. Iso-electric focusing (IEF) and SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE)	55
2.2.6. Materials	57
 3. VARIATION IN CORAL STRESS GENE EXPRESSION	 59
 3.1. Introduction	 59
3.2. Materials and methods	62
3.3. Results	62
3.4. Discussion	66
 4. CORALS HAVE LOWER POTENTIAL TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE WARMING THAN THEIR ALGAL ENDOSYMBIONTS	 72
 4.1. Introduction	 72
4.2. Materials and methods	77
4.3. Results	77
4.3.1. Symbiont traits	79
4.3.1.1. Dark-adapted fluorescence yield (F_v/F_m)	79
4.3.1.2. Light-adapted fluorescence yields (Φ_{PSII} , Φ_{NPQ} , and Φ_{NO})	81
4.3.1.3. Pigment ratios ($DT/(DD+DT)$, and $XP/(LH+XP)$)	86
4.3.2. Coral host traits	89
4.3.3. Holobiont trait	90
4.4. Discussion	91
4.4.1. Symbiont traits	92
4.4.2. Coral host traits	94
4.4.3. Holobiont trait	96
4.4.4. Evolutionary responses and time-frames for adaptive changes in the coral-algal symbiosis	97
4.4.5. Conclusion	101
 5. HERITABILITY OF THERMAL TOLERANCE IN THE REEF-BUILDING CORAL <i>ACROPORA MILLEPORA</i>	 103
 5.1. Introduction	 103

5.2. Materials and methods	105
5.3. Results	105
5.3.1. Symbiont traits	108
5.3.1.1. Dark-adapted fluorescence yield F_v/F_m	108
5.3.1.2. Light-adapted fluorescence yields (Φ_{PSII} , Φ_{NPQ} , and Φ_{NO})	110
5.3.1.3. Pigment ratios ($DT/(DD+DT)$, and $XP/(LH+XP)$)	116
5.3.2. Coral host traits	119
5.3.3. Holobiont trait	121
5.4. Discussion	123
5.4.1. Symbiont traits	126
5.4.2. Coral host traits	131
5.4.3. Holobiont trait	136
5.4.4. Conclusion	138
 6. GENERAL DISCUSSION	 140
 6.1. Summary of key findings	 140
6.2. Experimental design and outcomes	141
6.3. Factors affecting evolutionary outcomes	142
6.4. The future	146
 REFERENCES	 148
 APPENDICES	 169

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIMS	Australian Institute of Marine Science
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
cDNA	Complementary DNA
DD	Diadinoxanthin (xanthophyll pigment, epoxidised)
DT	Diatoxanthin (photoprotective xanthophyll pigment, de-epoxidised)
DT/(DD+DT)	Xanthophyll cycling activity expressed as molar pigment ratio
ECM	Extra cellular matrix
F	Minimum light-adapted fluorescence
F _o	Minimum dark-adapted fluorescence
F _m	Maximum dark-adapted fluorescence
F _m '	Maximum light-adapted fluorescence
F _v	variable fluorescence yield (=F _m -F _o)
F _v /F _m	Maximum quantum yield of Photosystem II
GBR	Great Barrier Reef
G x E	Genotype by environment
GLM	General Linear Model
GOI	Gene of interest
h^2	Heritability in the narrow sense
H^2	Heritability in the broad sense
Hsp70	Heat shock protein 70
ICG	Internal control gene
I-PAM	Imaging PAM
ITS1	Internal transcribed spacer 1
LED	Light emitting diode
LH	Light-harvesting pigments (chlorophyll <i>a</i> , chlorophyll <i>c</i> ₂ , peridinin, DD, DT)
MI	Magnetic Island
MMP	Matrix metalloprotease
MnSOD	Manganese superoxide dismutase
mRNA	Messenger RNA

OI	Orpheus Island
PAM	Pulse amplitude modulated
PCR	Polymerase chain reaction
PSII	Photosystem II
qP	Photochemical quenching
qN	Non-photochemical quenching
Φ PSII	Effective quantum yield of PSII
Φ NPQ	Regulated non-photochemical energy dissipation (photoprotective)
Φ NO	Unregulated energy dissipation (not photoprotective)
qRT-PCR	Quantitative real-time (or reverse transcription) PCR
<i>R</i>	Response to selection
ROS	Reactive oxygen species
<i>S</i>	Selection differential (strength of selection)
SOD	Superoxide dismutase
SSCP	Single strand conformation polymorphism
SST	Sea surface temperature
T_0	Time-point before the temperature ramp
V_A	Additive genetic variation
V_D	Dominance deviation
V_E	Environmental variation
V_G	Genetic variation
V_I	Interaction deviation
V_P	Phenotypic variation
XP	Xanthophyll pigments (DD and DT)
XP/(LH+XP)	Molar ratio of xanthophyll to total light-harvesting (including xanthophyll) pigments
Zn ²⁺ -met	Zinc-metalloprotease

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1 The reef-building coral *Acropora millepora*. Scale bar = 3 cm. Image: Ray Berkelmans.

Fig. 2.2 Map of the Great Barrier Reef showing the location of reefs from which coral colonies were collected for experimental analysis.

Fig. 2.3 Daily temperature means for Magnetic Island (based on 14–15 years of data) and Orpheus Island (13 years of data). Source: Ray Berkelmans.

Fig. 2.4 Gel image showing the different alleles for the microsatellite loci Amil2_12, Amil2_22 and Amil2_23 among the 20 colonies of *A. millepora* from Magnetic Island.

Fig. 2.5 Gel image showing the ITS1 region of *Symbiodinium* sub-clade D from the Magnetic Island population of *A. millepora* (n=20).

Fig. 2.6 Scheme showing the arrangement of five coral nubbins on individual and manoeuvrable plastic grids.

Fig. 2.7 Dark- and light-adapted fluorescence kinetics (image modified from van Kooten & Snel 1990). Depending on light conditions, five different states can be distinguished. The corresponding fluorescence parameters (F_0 , F_m , etc.) and quenching coefficients (qP , qN) are shown.

Fig. 2.8 Real-time PCR profile for the relative quantification of gene expression levels. Reactions are run in triplicate. For example, a threshold cycle (CT) difference of seven cycles between a stressed and an unstressed coral sample would indicate that stressed samples had $2^7 = 128$ times more cDNA of the gene of interest (GOI). Internal control genes (ITC) should not display different gene expression levels between treatments.

Fig. 2.9 Gel image (2-DE) of *Acropora millepora* showing the pH range of 4-7.

Fig. 3.1 Mean levels of coral host antioxidant and stress-gene expression in 20 bleached (32 °C) *A. millepora* colonies relative to their unstressed clonal counterparts (T₀; 27 °C). The within genotype variation (error bars represent standard errors; n=4) often exceeds the variation between colonies, indicating that expression levels are largely controlled by environmental rather than genetic factors. (A) Ferritin, (B) Hsp70, (C) MnSOD, (D) zinc-metalloprotease (Zn²⁺-met). Note the different scale on the y-axes.

Fig. 4.1 Fluorescence parameters in clade D *Symbiodinium* associated with *A. millepora* at 32 °C over the course of time (days from start of heating until 32 °C was reached, i.e. on day 0). (○) Maximum quantum yield of PSII (Fv/Fm), (●) effective quantum yield (ΦPSII), (▼) regulated non-photochemical quenching (ΦNPQ), (▽) unregulated non-photochemical quenching (ΦNO). Error bars represent standard errors (n=20 coral colonies).

Fig. 4.2 Change in maximum photosynthetic efficiency (Fv/Fm) of symbionts (clade D) harboured by a population of *A. millepora* corals (n=20 colonies) after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Each of the twenty coral genotypes was replicated (n=4) to create a genotypic standard error (SE); for the control treatment, however, n=2.

Fig. 4.3 Change in effective PSII quantum yield (ΦPSII) after exposure of coral genotypes (n=20) to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for seven days. Note that for the 27 °C treatment, data is missing for colonies #6–10, thus n=15 (explanation in the text). Error bars show standard errors (SE).

Fig. 4.4 Change in regulated non-photochemical quenching (ΦNPQ) after exposure of coral genotypes (n=20) to three different temperatures for seven days. Note that for the 27 °C treatment, data is missing for colonies #6–10, thus n=15. Error bars show standard errors (SE).

Fig. 4.5 Change in unregulated non-photochemical quenching (ΦNO) after exposure of coral genotypes (n=20) to three different temperatures for seven days. Note that for the

27 °C treatment, data is missing for colonies #6–10, thus $n=15$. Error bars show standard errors (SE).

Fig. 4.6 Proportion of competing energy dissipation pathways before the temperature ramp (day -5; 27 °C), and at the end (day 7) of the experiment after exposure to three experimental temperatures. Φ_{PSII} – effective quantum yield of PSII, Φ_{NPQ} – regulated non-photochemical quenching, Φ_{NO} – unregulated non-photochemical quenching. (A) 32 °C, (B) 31 °C, (C) 27 °C.

Fig. 4.7 Symbiont pigment ratios under control (T_0 ; 27 °C) and bleaching conditions (32 °C). Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). (A) Ratios of the photoprotective xanthophyll pigment diatoxanthin (DT) relative to diadinoxanthin (DD) (i.e. $DT/(DD+DT)$). (B) Ratios of xanthophyll pigments (XP) relative to total light-harvesting pigments (LH) (i.e. $XP/(LH+XP)$).

Fig. 4.8 Changes in holobiont (coral-algal symbiosis) weight of 20 bleached *A. millepora* colonies after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$).

Fig. 4.9 Theoretical evolutionary outcomes under strong selection for thermal tolerance for (A) one symbiont trait (F_v/F_m) with high broad-sense heritability ($H^2=0.5$) and (B) one coral host trait (MnSOD expression) with low H^2 (0.18). The bars on the left side show the mean change (error bar represents standard error) in the respective trait in the current generation ($n=20$) under bleaching temperatures (32 °C). The bars to the right show the evolutionary response to selection ($R = H^2S$) in the next generation (F1) assuming that only the top 30 % performing genotypes ($n=6$; middle bars) out of the total population are selected (S) as parents. (A) The observed reduction in photosynthetic efficiency (F_v/F_m) in the current symbiont generation could be lowered by $R = 2.2$ % in the next generation. (B) MnSOD expression patterns in the next coral generation could be increased by $R = 3.2$ %.

Fig. 5.1 Fluorescence quantum yields of PSII in *A. millepora* at 32 °C over the course of time (days from start of heating from 27 °C; 32 °C was reached on day 0). (○)

Maximum quantum yield of PSII (F_v/F_m), (●) effective quantum yield (Φ_{PSII}), (▼) regulated non-photochemical quenching (Φ_{NPQ}), (▽) unregulated non-photochemical quenching (Φ_{NO}). Error bars represent standard errors ($n=18$).

Fig. 5.2 Change in maximum photosynthetic efficiency (F_v/F_m) of *Symbiodinium* C2 symbionts of 20 *A. millepora* colonies after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note that for the 32 °C treatment, data is missing for colony #1 and #18 (explanation in the text).

Fig. 5.3 Effective PSII quantum yield (Φ_{PSII}) of coral genotypes ($n=20$) after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note that for the 32 °C treatment, data is missing for colony #1 and #18.

Fig. 5.4 Regulated non-photochemical quenching (Φ_{NPQ}) of coral genotypes ($n=20$) after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note that for the 32 °C treatment, data is missing for colony #1 and #18.

Fig. 5.5 Unregulated non-photochemical quenching (Φ_{NO}) of coral genotypes ($n=20$) after exposure to three different temperatures (27 °C – black bars, 31 °C – light-grey bars, and 32 °C – dark-grey bars) for nine days. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note that for the 32 °C treatment, data is missing for colony #1 and #18.

Fig. 5.6 Complementary PSII excitation energy pathways at the start (day -5) and the end (day 9) of the heat-stress experiment under three different temperatures. Φ_{PSII} – effective quantum yield of PSII, Φ_{NPQ} – regulated non-photochemical quenching, Φ_{NO} – unregulated non-photochemical quenching. (A) bleaching (32 °C), (B) sub-bleaching (31 °C), (C) control temperatures (27 °C).

Fig. 5.7 Symbiont pigment ratios in bleached (32 °C) and control samples (T_0 , 27 °C). Note the different scale on the y-axes. Also note that there is no data for colonies #1 and 18 in bleached samples (explanation in the text), thus colonies #1–16 as shown in

this graph represent colonies #2–17 from Figures 5.2–5.5; colonies #17 and #18 shown here represent colonies #19 and #20, respectively. (A) Ratio of diatoxanthin to diadinoxanthin ($DT/(DD+DT)$), (B) Ratio of xanthophyll pigments to total light-harvesting pigments ($XP/(LH+XP)$). Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$).

Fig. 5.8 Percent change in expression patterns of four coral stress genes after exposure to bleaching temperature. Note that there is no data for colonies #1 and 18 in bleached samples (explanation in the text), thus colonies #1–16 as shown in this graph represent colonies #2–17 from Figures 5.2–5.5; colonies #17 and #18 shown here represent colonies #19 and #20, respectively. (A) Ferritin, (B) Hsp70, (C) MnSOD, (D) Zn^{2+} -met. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note the different scale on the y-axes.

Fig. 5.9 Holobiont growth rates for each of the 20 *A. millepora* colonies (defined as percent change in total coral weight) during 9 days of exposure to bleaching temperature. Error bars represent standard errors ($n=4$). Note that for the 32 °C treatment, data is missing for colony #1 and #18.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Calculation of light-adapted fluorescence yields (Kramer et al. 2004). Φ PSII – effective quantum yield of PSII, Φ NPQ – regulated non-photochemical quenching, Φ NO – unregulated non-photochemical quenching.

Table 2.2 Experimental schedule shown for the highest temperature treatment (32 °C). Six days before the target temperature was reached, the control coral nubbins (T_0 ; 27 °C) that served as the baseline for the post-experimental analysis were sampled and snap-frozen. Both dark- and light-adapted PAM fluorescence measurements were performed every second day. Weighing of coral nubbins occurred on day 0 and 8 (indicated with W). In the Magnetic Island (MI) population, the final dark-adapted Fv/Fm reading was performed on day 9 immediately prior to sampling the coral specimens for the post-experimental analysis, whereas in the Orpheus Island (OI) population, both dark- and light-adapted fluorescence yields were obtained on day 9 prior to the final sampling on day 10.

Table 2.3 Forward (F) and reverse (R) primers used to amplify four oxidative stress genes in two populations (Magnetic Island – MI, and Orpheus Island – OI) of the coral *Acropora millepora*. Sequences for genes of interest (GOI) and internal control genes (ICG) are shown (ICG are indicated with *).

Table 3.1 Mean levels (\bar{x}) and standard errors (\pm SE) of antioxidant and stress-gene up-regulation in the bleached-(n=79) relative to the non-bleached (n=79) coral samples; given in percent (%) averaged over 20 colonies. Up-regulation was significant for each of the four genes ($p \leq 0.01$, $df=78$, two-tailed t -test). Correlation coefficients (r) for the direction of gene expression change between the four genes across the bleached samples (n=79) are given. Significant positive correlations are indicated with * ($p < 0.05$), highly significant with ** ($p < 0.01$).

Table 4.1 Overview of heritability and mean changes in thermal tolerance traits under experimental temperatures in a population of *Acropora millepora* from Magnetic Island and its clade D symbionts. Heritability (H^2 , its standard error (SE), and its significance

at $p < 0.05$) and mean percent changes in phenotypic traits (% Δ , where - means reduction and + increase (\pm SE)) are shown. Changes in symbiont pigment ratios are given as factor change. Total sample sizes for the different temperature treatments ranged from $n=29-40$ for 27 °C, to $n=80$ for 31 °C and $n=79-80$ for 32 °C. Temperature treatments for which data were not obtained are indicated as not available (n. a.). Statistical results for heritability are from ANOVA, which were considered significant at $p < 0.05$, and for mean changes from two-tailed t -tests (at $p < 0.05$). Significant heritabilities are indicated bold and with asterisks (*), and significant mean changes with asterisks. Mean changes in trait values that were obtained after 7 days of exposure to experimental temperatures (as opposed to 9 days) are signified by ^a.

Table 4.2 Comparison of molar pigment ratios and total pigment concentrations (μg pigment g coral wet weight⁻¹) between initial conditions (T_0 ; 27 °C) and after exposure to 32 °C. The factor changes of ratios and concentrations between the two treatments are also shown. DD – diadinoxanthin, DT – diatoxanthin, XP – xanthophylls, LH –light-harvesting pigments, Chl – chlorophyll.

Table 5.1 Overview of heritability and mean changes in thermal tolerance traits under experimental temperatures in a population of *Acropora millepora* from Orpheus Island and its type C2 symbionts. Heritability (H^2 , its standard error (SE), and its significance at $p < 0.05$) and mean percent changes in phenotypic traits (% Δ , where - means reduction and + increase (\pm SE)) are shown. Changes in symbiont pigment ratios are given as factor change. Total sample sizes were $n=80$ for both 27 and 31 °C, and $n=72$ for 32 °C. Temperature treatments for which data were not obtained are indicated as not available (n. a.). Statistical results for heritability are from ANOVA, which were considered significant at $p < 0.05$, and for mean changes from two-tailed t -tests (at $p < 0.05$). Significant heritabilities are indicated bold and with asterisks (*), and significant mean changes with asterisks.

Table 5.2 Comparison of molar pigment ratios and total pigment concentrations (μg pigment g coral wet weight⁻¹) between initial conditions (T_0 ; 27 °C) and after exposure to 32 °C. Changes in ratios and concentrations between the two treatments are shown as factor changes. DD – diadinoxanthin, DT – diatoxanthin, XP – xanthophylls, LH – light-harvesting pigments, Chl – chlorophyll.

Table 5.3 Overview of heritability and mean changes in thermal tolerance traits under bleaching conditions (32 °C). Heritabilities and mean percent changes (- means reduction and + increase; (\pm SE)) in the investigated traits in the Orpheus Island (OI) and the Magnetic Island (MI) population of *Acropora millepora*, and their respective type C2 and clade D symbionts. Mean changes in symbiont pigment ratios are given as factor change. Statistical results for heritability are from ANOVA, which were considered significant at $p < 0.05$, and for mean changes from two-tailed t -tests (at $p < 0.05$). Significant heritabilities are indicated bold with asterisks (*), and mean changes with asterisks. Mean changes in trait values that are compared for seven days of exposure to bleaching conditions (as opposed to nine days) are signified by a.

Table 5.4 Overview of energy dissipation pathways in both C2 symbionts from Orpheus Island (OI) and D symbionts from Magnetic Island (MI) at the beginning of the experiment (day -5) and after exposure to 32 °C for 7 days (given as percent). Φ PSII – effective quantum yield of PSII, Φ NPQ – regulated non-photochemical quenching, Φ NO – unregulated non-photochemical quenching.

Appendix B 1 ANOVA table: Maximum dark-adapted fluorescence yield (F_v/F_m) and coral (holobiont) growth.

Appendix B 2 ANOVA table: Light-adapted fluorescence yields (Φ PSII, Φ NPQ, and Φ NO).

Appendix B 3 ANOVA table: Symbiont pigment ratios ($DT/(DD+DT)$ and $XP/(LH+XP)$).

Appendix B 4 ANOVA table: Coral host gene expression.

Appendix B 5: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for F_v/F_m and Φ PSII.

Appendix B 6: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for Φ NPQ and Φ NO.

Appendix B 7: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for coral (holobiont) growth.

Appendix C 1 ANOVA table: Maximum dark-adapted fluorescence yield (F_v/F_m) and coral (holobiont) growth.

Appendix C 2 ANOVA table: Light-adapted fluorescence yields (Φ_{PSII} , Φ_{NPQ} , and Φ_{NO}).

Appendix C 3 ANOVA table: Symbiont pigment ratios ($DT/(DD+DT)$ and $XP/(LH+XP)$).

Appendix C 4 ANOVA table: Coral host gene expression.

Appendix C 5: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for F_v/F_m and Φ_{PSII} .

Appendix C 6: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for Φ_{NPQ} and Φ_{NO} .

Appendix C 7: Genotype by environment (G x E) interaction for coral (holobiont) growth.